

**SOS: Support Public Broadcasting Coalition**  
22 Art Centre, Suite 1, Cnr 4<sup>th</sup> Ave & 6<sup>th</sup> Street,  
Parkhurst, 2193, Johannesburg  
Phone +27 74 690 1023; +27 76 084 8077  
Email [carol@soscoalition.org.za](mailto:carol@soscoalition.org.za)  
[sekoetlane@soscoalition.org.za](mailto:sekoetlane@soscoalition.org.za)



## **A CRITICAL SUMMARY OF THE DOC'S DTT STATE OF READINESS REPORT TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON LABOUR AND PUBLIC ENTERPRISE**

Last Wednesday, 15 August, the Department of Communications (DoC) and signal distributor, Sentech, met with the Select committee on Labour and Public Enterprise to appraise it on their state of readiness in the much anticipated and hotly contested process of migration from analogue to digital technology broadcasting (digital migration.)

For an overly protracted period of time, the DoC along with other major State stakeholders have been all too silent on the matter, leaving South Africans in the dark and in a state of confusion about what the migration process entailed, when it would begin and to what extent it would impact on their lives.

Despite numerous calls from civil society and the SOS Coalition, in particular, the DoC has failed to communicate openly and with certainty to the South African public on its progress thus far, the major considerations that would need to be made at policy level to create an enabling environment for the process to unfold seamlessly and effectively as well as firm details on when and how to expect switch-over to happen.

The availability of this special briefing report on the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) [website](#) has been a most welcome development in this regard, as it sheds some light on all of these questions and more.

In the special briefing, the DoC gave a broad outline of some of the major challenges which led to the delays in the migration process, the major developments it has made as well as some detail as to how the migration to Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) would unfold going forward.

### **BACKGROUND**

As a member of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), South Africa had committed to complete its digital migration by 17 June 2015. Central to this commitment to change broadcasting technologies was the ability to use frequency spectrum more efficiently which would the deeper penetration and wider accessibility of broadcasting, broadband and telecommunication services to South Africans. Tied to the change in broadcasting technologies is the promise of rapidly bridging the digital divide and expanding

the free-flow of knowledge between all South Africans, all of which are integral in the national project of repositioning South Africa from a resource to a knowledge-based economy.

While government had made the commitment in 2006 with the self-imposed targets of digital switch on to commence in 2008 through to 2011 when the analogue signal would be switched off, South Africa has yet to have its digital signal switched on. This delay is particularly concerning in light of the major implications it has for the success of the migration process for all parties concerned.

Several key issues emerge in this regard:

- Will the DoC, which is vested with the inordinate responsibility of steering this migration, be able to reach all South Africans and elicit a positive response out of them to purchase a set-top box (STB) decoder and aerial in order to not be “blacked out” when the analogue signal is switched off in 2015?
- Is Sentech sufficiently equipped and ready to roll out the infrastructure to ensure that all South Africans receive coverage of the digital signal, particularly in light of the country’s restrictive topology and population distribution.
- Will broadcasters be able to afford to carry the significant cost of transmitting across both digital and analogue signals during the three-year dual-illumination period which, given the uncertainties in the migration process, is already expected to run well after 2015?
- Has the DoC reached any positive headway in transforming broadcasting and ICT policy to suit the new technological environment which we are entering into?
- Will the DTT environment, which promises more channels and significantly more programming space, necessarily stimulate the local productions industry and enable South Africans to tell and see more of their own stories?

## **CHALLENGES**

As per the report, most of the key challenges facing the DoC and other stakeholders are tied to the delay in the migration. At the heart of the delay was a regional decision in the SADC countries in early 2010 to review the Digital Video Broadcasting-Terrestrial (DVB-T) standard which they had adopted at the 2006 ITU conference and, instead, use the second generation of the same standard known as DVB-2.

While the switch in standards significantly delayed the migration process for South Africa, in particular, it was a brave and well-conceived decision which would not only afford us almost twice the spectrum efficiency of DVB-T, but would also prove to be the most widely adopted standard, globally, allowing for cheaper and more adaptable hardware as well as greater ease of technological convergence and compatibility across regions, which is critical in an increasingly globalising world.

With the change in technological standards necessarily followed a series of delays in the migration programme. These included a delay in Digital Migration Policy which was only finalised in February this year, delays in the STB manufacturing tender process which government has been resolute should be local in order to stimulate local industry, serious concern over the cost and accessibility of the STB, particularly for low income households as well as confusion as to when and how the public should ready itself for switch-on.

In addition to this, the DoC reports that it requires a further R7bn over and above the three-year Medium Term Expenditure Budget to meet all its commitments in terms of the migration and analogue switch-off in 2015.

So what has the DoC and its strategic partners managed to accomplish so far?

### **KEY MILESTONES**

According to Communications Minister, Dina Pule, and her team, we are ready to migrate which, in government speak, really means we're not quite ready but think we're probably well on our way. The special briefing report, which is still not so readily available to the public, has begun to answer some crucial questions against which we can measure and be confident in our state of readiness.

### **Policy**

The first of these are the amendments made to the broadcasting digital migration policy which continue to promote the three tier broadcasting services model. This alone gives a strong indication of government's commitment to protecting public service and community broadcasting which speaks to and is broadly representative of all South Africans, while still making space for a vibrant commercial broadcasting industry.

This is further buttressed by amendments which promote competition in the industry and allow for the introduction of new broadcasting services during the dual-illumination period, both of which are crucial to disrupting the market dominance of prevailing broadcasters as well as increasing the diversity of programming offerings for the end-user.

Of course, this has been a particularly sore point of contention for established broadcasters whose sustainability and/or profitability are threatened by the fact that access onto the new platform is being opened up to new players while they collectively have to carry the full cost of promoting the platform through new content offerings. Accordingly, they will continue to challenge and attempt to renegotiate the application of these policy imperatives, particularly in the DTT regulations proposed by the independent regulator, ICASA at this week's hearings.

The third major policy development has been the establishment of a Digital Migration Office in the DoC whose prime concern will be providing project management and monitoring

services to the DTT programme, a significant component of which will be the roll-out of the migration across South Africa.

### **Infrastructure**

During this time, the DoC reports that Sentech has been working hard to set up the DTT network to ensure that South Africa has full coverage once switch-on is initiated and the migration programme is rolled out. The strategy in this regard has been to have 80% coverage by March 2012, 61% of which has already been achieved. Sentech further expects that it will reach 88% by December 2013. The remaining 12% which really concerns remote areas as well as the Square Kilometre Array SKA field in the Northern Cape where terrestrial transmission may not be possible owing to frequency interference issues will be covered through satellite and direct to home transmission.

### **Broadcaster Readiness**

In terms of the report, both free-to-air broadcasters, the SABC and eTV have asserted their readiness to start transmission of their existing channels on the DTT platform. In addition to these will be the public broadcaster's much anticipated 24 hour news channel whose details, beyond the announcement of the imminence of its launch on pay-TV broadcaster, DSTV, it has been very quiet about. In addition to this will be an additional free-to-air collaborative venture between both the SABC and eTV. The pay channel, M-Net has also indicated its readiness to launch on the DTT platform.

### **ROLL-OUT**

With only a small few South Africans even aware of the imminence of the Digital Migration process, a critical question has been the roll-out programme. The DoC gazetted a request for tender proposals in July this year and expects that it will have identified an appropriate manufacturer by mid September. In addition to this, the Department reports that it has finalised its DTT Consumer Awareness Campaign Plan, the full details of which have not been disclosed. This will, ostensibly, also entail call centres set up in both free-to-air broadcasters, Sentech and the DoC in order to field the steady stream of questions about the migration which have already started to come in and will increase exponentially once DTT is launched.

The DoC has also entered into a partnership with the South African Postal Service (SAPO), Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA) and SABC to manage the distribution logistics. SAPO will design and manage the software processes which will identify qualifying subsidy recipients and the USAASA will be primarily concerned with distribution to these.

Accordingly, a sum to the tune of R940m has been ring-fenced to the agency for these purposes for this financial year alone. The role of the SABC in this regard, however, has been

unclear. Further, nothing has been said on when and how STBs will be made available to unsubsidised South Africans except that the STBs will come at a reduced estimated cost of R400 (significantly less than the R700 that had been estimated initially) and that about 3500 installers had been identified by the Department countrywide to do installations.

A key area of concern in this regard, however, is the R800m shortfall in the DoC's budget for the DTT Awareness Campaign which is critical for encouraging South African's to migrate onto the new platform and avoid being "blacked out" come July 2015. If free-to-air television is to remain sustainable and survive in the digital era, it is critical that DoC and all its partners get the launch right as early as possible and build confidence in an already disillusioned consumers base to take up its offering and not move over to the far more attractive offerings pay-TV broadcasters such as MultiChoice's DSTV and its upcoming digital package instead.

Further, the practicalities of the commitments the DoC has made remain questionable. Not only do open and transparent processes which have passed the full gamut of checks and balances often take longer than the short few months the DoC has allocated between the July commencement of the Request for Proposal process and the DTT launch date, but it also takes up to three months to manufacture a single STB.

Further, before being made available to consumers, these STBs also need to be passed by the South African Bureau of Standards' (SABS) Conformance lab which is only set to be ready in October of this year. In addition to this, the installers, call centre staff, other technical and information personnel as well as retailers who will necessarily be involved in this massive campaign still require training.

Has the Department given itself enough time to make the necessary preparations to ensure a smooth, effective and widespread migration, or will the process be beleaguered with more delays and conflicting messages which have the potential of simply putting consumers off the process altogether?

With all of these preparations in the pipeline, when can we expect to be switched on?

### **SWITCH-ON**

The DoC has, prudently, chosen to launch DTT across two phases. The first of these will be a small launch in 20 households in a remote Northern Cape township near Kimberley which has the sole DTT transmitter in the province on 26-27 September 2012. This phase is geared to prove the efficacy of the technological concept in an area expected to experience the worst of the technological difficulties owing to the nearby SKA field, as well as to announce to the nation that the network is ready and available. This will build up to the second phase where the DTT platform will be commercially launched to the rest of South Africa in late November/December 2012.

## CONCLUSION

While the DoC report demonstrates some massive strides in its DTT readiness programme, there are still a number of major gaps that need to be filled before South Africa can say it is truly ready for switch-on.

Far too many policy issues remain unresolved for how the DTT platform will be structured and regulated going forward. The lack of detail on the commercial roll-out programme for unsubsidised subscribers, in particular, combined with the incredibly rushed and yet to be concluded tender processes through which the migration will be made possible also raises a number of flags.

Further, the small scale of the first phase of the launch and the lack of details on the programme to be followed in the second, particularly for unsubsidised consumers, all too much remains unclear as regards the foreseeable success of the migration launch and what will follow from it.

While some critical gains have been made in terms of preparing for the official migration to DTT, there are some equally large gaps in the roll-out plan which need to be filled in order to ensure that the process unfolds seamlessly. South Africa still has a long way to go in the Digital Migration process before analogue switch-off and a close eye still needs to be kept on the process.

For more information and up-to-date progress reports on the Digital Migration process, visit the SOS Coalition's website. Like our [Facebook](#) page and follow us [@sos\\_za](#) on twitter.